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ABSTRACT

The factors influencing the decision to return to graduate school in an emerging professional group, physical therapy, are described, and a causal model incorporating the principal constructs of the status attainment and college impact model is proposed. The five variable sets included are background characteristics, college characteristics, college experiences, work experiences, and attitude toward graduate study. Data were obtained from respondents to a statewide survey of licensed physical therapists all of whom were sent a self-administered questionnaire. Information was requested regarding plans for graduate education, attitudes toward attendance, current employment conditions, area of specialization, characteristics of previous college attendance, and background information. The study confirms the longstanding articulation of graduate education and vocational interests. Of the five variable sets, the overwhelming influence was the desire to advance in clinical/technical skills. Job conditions of specialization and income further enhanced the educational decision. Attitudes toward research and scholarship do not appear to reach critical importance. Little influence from the college experience was found, and background attributes and aspirations exerted cumulative effects through both institutional choice and labor market opportunities. No influence was seen from cost factors. Contains 30 references. (Author/SM)

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Factors Influencing the Decision to Return to Graduate School in One Professional Group, Physical Therapy

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Adam's Mark Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, November 3-6, 1988. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe factors influencing the decision to return to graduate school in an emerging professional group, physical therapy. A causal model incorporating the principal constructs of the status attainment and college impact model was proposed. Five variable sets were included: background characteristics, college characteristics, college experiences, work experiences and attitude toward graduate study. The sample was composed of 217 physical therapists who responded to a 1988 statewide survey on graduate education. The longstanding articulation of graduate education and vocational interests was confirmed. The overwhelming influence in this group was from the desire to advance in clinical/technical skills. Career conditions of specialization and income further influenced the educational decision. Less infuence was seen from the college experience. Cost factors which have been found to be predominant in many groups did not influence the decision. Factors which influence educational decisions and the manner in which they exert their influence are important in determining who attains the status advantages of graduate education.

The Decision to Attend Graduate School in the Physical Therapy Profession

The complex process of status attainment in our society confers significant advantages to those who successfully negotiate its challenges and reach its highest levels. Viewed as an interaction between background characteristics and subsequent experiences/achievements, the latter half of this process is subject to individual initiative. Of the possible intervening experiences/achievements of the individual, educational attainments have been shown to positively influence the overall status attainment process (e.g., Sewell, Hauser and Featherman, 1976). Colleges, universities and the graduate schools within them act as agents of stratification within the higher education system and the society at large (Berelson, 1960). If results of the status attainment process accrue commensurate with the maximization of experiences such as undergraduate and graduate school attendance, then decisions regarding study at these levels are pivotal in the process. Particularly, decisions which encompass educational planning such as whether to attend, when to attend, in what field, etc. may then be considered critical junctures in the status attainment sequence. To attend or not attend school at the undergraduate level is a significant question. However, the same question at the graduate level, with its direct link to occupational/career accomplishment, is more closely related to and may have more impact on subsequent status attainment.

Several models of the college decision process have been developed in the last decade (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Kotler, 1976; Manski and Wise, 1983) in response to projections of declining undergraduate enrollments. The component related to choice of undergraduate institution has been most extensively investigated (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1983; Davis-Van Atta and Carrier, 1986). While this literature suggests areas of study, it appears inappropriate to attribute its findings to the next higher level of students since the decision process at the graduate level has been considered to be much more complex than at the undergraduate level (Mc Clain, Vance and Wood, 1984; Olson and King, 1985). Involving multidimensional concerns of ability, income, expense, employment, and possibly inestimatible opportunity costs, the graduate student has a wide range of potential problems restricting the decision process which the undergraduate student does nct have.

Factors influencing the decision to attend graduate school can be divided into two broad catagories: 1) intrinsic factors related to student characteristics such as, goals or aspirations and fixed attributes; and 2) extrinsic factors such as institutional characteristics, financial aid and career field characteristics. In the landmark study of the decisions of college students regarding post-baccalaureate education, Gropper and Fitzpatrick (1959) describe the pivotal role of the student's vocational objectives in the decision to attend. In the three decades following that study, the necessity for obtaining a

graduate degree to qualify for a field and the desire to learn more about the field/specialty have maintained top ranking as reasons to attend graduate school (Baird, 1976; Malaney, 1987). Other vocationally related reasons include the opportunity to achieve higher income, and the prospect of promotion and/or prestige within the field (Baird, 1976). Many students also include professional or armchair assessments of labor market projections for their respective career as a dominant factor in the decision-making process (National Board on Graduate Education, 1975). A second major goal expressed by students returning to graduate school involves the development of personal achievements or personal satisfaction needs (Heiss, 1970; Malaney, 1987).

In addition to expressed goals and aspirations, the background characteristics of race, sex, ability, and socioeconomic status are known to distinquish graduate students (Gropper and Fitzpatrick, 1959; Malaney, 1987). Higher socioeconomic status, higher ability, and being a white male student individually and collectively, increase the likelihood of attending graduate school. The relationship of these attributes and graduate school attendance may not be completely straightforward, however. Baird (1976) has reported on research indicating the effect of family socioeconomic status is minimized at the graduate school level due to the assimiliation of middle-class values at the undergraduate level. At the same time, his own research suggests higher socioeconomic status increases the likelihood of

attendance, particularly for professional students. Beyond socioeconomic status, the higher the ability of the student the more likely they will be to attend graduate school. The degree of this relationship however, for all grade levels, including honors level, has been shown to depend on gender (Baird, 1976; Malaney & Isaac, 1988). It has also been known for some time that race influences the decision to attend (Davis, 1964; Grigg, 1965). Being a white student increases the likelihood of going to graduate school, but this relationship too may be related in part to economic factors acting to diminish perceived feasiblitiy for Non-white groups (Baird, 1976; Malaney,1987).

Another set of influences on the decison to attend graduate school involve elements extrinsic to the student. Probably the paramount extrinsic issue is related to cost and the receipt of financial aid. Both Gropper and Fitzpatrick (1959) and Davis (1964) found cost concern to be a critical reason for a negative decision. It appears to be a particularly important concern for students in the arts and sciences (Baird, 1976). All students however, must finance their education either through loans, parental support, or employment and it is this global cost factor which influences the decision to attend (Davis, 1965; Heiss, 1970). Financial aid, while uniquely important at the graduate level as an avenue facilitating study and promoting mentorship, is thought to be very important in the choice of a graduate institution. So also is the case with the other institutional characteristics. Institutional factors such as location, size,

and program quality are thought to dominate the decision of which school to attend, rather than whether to attend.

While there is a high rate of interest in graduate education in most careeer fields, field of study introduces unique factors in the decision to attend graduate school (Gropper and Fitzpatrick, 1959; Malaney and Isaac, 1988). Student background characteristics vary as does the function of graduate school within the particular field. Davis (1965) organized the effect of this later variable on decision to attend by dividing fields of study into three groups, those in which graduate school is: 1) an immediate necessity; 2) an eventual necessity; and 3) a luxury. The importance of promotion, prestige, income and potential for these occupational rewards as well as their existance within an occupational organizational structure can be an important influence on whether to select graduate education or an immediate employment opportunity.

While these intrinsic and extrinsic factors appear to be influential in the decision to attend graduate school, only one study has attempted to go beyond the descriptive relationship and elucidate how these factors might influence the decision. Ethington and Smart (1986) proposed a causal model of the process by which the decision is made to enter graduate school. Using a combination of the status attainment models and the theoretical persistence/withdrawal model of Tinto, they suggest the decision is a function of student characteristics, institutional characteristics and experiences, and financial aid availability.

Their results confirm the direct importance of degree completion, financial aid, and the undergraduate institutional characteristics and experiences in the student's decision. More importantly, their results provide insight into the dynamics of the decision by clarifying indirect influences acting in the process. For example, while socioeconomic status has been thought to directly influence the decision, their findings indicate socioeconomic status manifests its influence indirectly through influencing the selectivity of the undergraduate institution attended by men and influencing the academic experience at the undergraduate institution for women. Each of these, in turn, exerts influence on the decision to attend graduate school. However, this study treats the student respondents as an undifferentiated group without attention to the potential occupational variations influencing the decision.

Tinto (1981) has recently suggested that the status attainment process varies by occupational group. When the labor market is treated as having unique components, the relative expression of variables influencing attainment differs substantially between professional and business-managerial occupations. If, as Tinto indicates, the process itself is subject to occupational variation, one might also project that the critical decision points in the process such as the decision to attend graduate school, might also be influenced by differing sets of factors in professional and non-professional groups. Characteristics of student groups have been widely described at the undergraduate level (e.g.,

Astin, 1965, 1977), the graduate level (e.g., Baird, 1976; Heiss, 1970) and for some professions (e.g., Malaney, 1983; McClain, Vance & Wood, 1984). However, the decisions of these students, the factors which influence them, and the processes in which they engage in making the decisions, are far less well explicated.

The purpose of this study is to extend information on the process of making the decision to attend graduate school. It uses an emerging professional group, physical therapy, which has recently dramatically increased its educational committment to graduate level preparation and which reflects a growing trend in rapidly developing professional fields to have a high rate of return of vocationally oriented students to the academic environment (Smith, 1985). By proposing a causal model, the study attempts to identify important factors and describe how these factors exert their influence on the decision process for physical therapy and for similiar professional groups. The causal framework used here reflects the view of Ethington and Smart (1986) that matriculation at the graduate level is not the result of a single decision, but rather reflects the end point of a number of decisions regarding educational committment.

METHOD

Model

The model proposed for this study includes five major sets of variables thought to influence the decision to attend graduate school. It incorporates the principle constructs of both the

status attainment and college impact models. Emphasizing currently employed professional returning students, it differs from standard models by including work experience factors. The model proposes that background characteristics of the students influence their early college choices and experiences within those institutions. These academic and social accomplishments within the institution, in turn, result in attainments which create occupational opportunity. The professional work experience subsequently exerts strong influence on whether to return to graduate school. The full model is depicted in Figure I.

The first set of variables in the model are exogenous variables, that is, they are determined by variables outside the model. Background characteristics of the respondents included in the model are sex, race, and degree aspiration. These characteristics play a part in determining what type of undergraduate institution a student attends. The second set of variables is college Carnegie type and college size. In conjunction with the background characteristics, these institutional factors further influence the range of experiences the student has within the undergraduate environment. Thus the third set of variables, the college experience variables are college academic achievements and college satisfaction. A good fit between the student and the institution promoting positive academic integration and overall satisfaction will facilitate further educational commitment to advanced schooling. Intervening between undergraduate and

graduate study for many professional students is a period of occupational experience. It is determined most directly by the college experience the student has, but also indirectly by the background characteristics and aspirations of the student. The characteristics of this occupational experience, level of specialty, level of satisfaction and income, constitute the fourth set of variables in the model. The close relationship between occupational enhancement and graduate study should create an important role for those job-related factors to directly influence the decision to return to school. The job-related factors however, first exert influence on the students' attitudes toward returning to school. The importance of factors of cost, clinical expertise, and research skill are the fifth set of variables. They most directly influence the decision to attend graduate school. Finally, the eventual decision to attend graduate school in physical therapy or not is seen to be dependent on all previous variables. While positive attitudes are seen to most directly influence the decision, positive professional experience after college is expected to crystalize the advantages of graduate level study. The ongoing presence of background characteristics and aspirations is expected to exert significant indirect effects on the decision to attend through intervening college and occupational experience variables.

Sample

Data for this study were obtained from respondents to a statewide survey of licensed physical therapists. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 600 physical therapists in February of 1988. The survey requested information regarding plans for graduate education and attitudes toward attendance, as well as current employment conditions, area of specialization, characteristics of previous college attendance, and background information. Four hundred three respondents returned the questionnaire for a response rate of 67%. The sample for this study included all respondents as of April, 1988 who had complete data, resulting in a sample of 217 physical therapists.

Analysis

The data were analyzed in two parts. First, each endogenous variable was regressed on all exogenous variables and causally antecedent endogenous variables using ordinary least squares regression. The resultant equations represent the direct effects of the causal variables on the dependent measure, net of the influence of all other variables.

Secondly, the indirect effects, the sum of the products of the direct effects through intervening variables, was calculated. GEMINI, a FORTRAN program (Wolfle and Ethington, 1985) was used to calculate the magnitude and significance of the indirect effects. An alpha level of .05 was used.

RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS

The five sets of variables in the causal model, background characteristics, institutional characteristics, college experiences, work experience and attitudes of the student accounted for 39.6% of the variance in the decision to attend graduate school in the professional group of physical therapy. This is a modest improvement over the Ethington and Smart study (1986) which explained 35% of the variance for men and 31% of the variance for women in the decision to attend graduate school for students as an undifferentiated group.

Five variables in the model directly influenced the decision to attend graduate school. By far, the most important factor in the decision to attend graduate school in this professional group was the importance the respondent attributed to improving clinical/technical skills necessary for the job. The overwhelming direct influence (beta=0.528) of this factor reflects the continuing pervasive influence of vocational considerations in the pursuit of graduate education. Either intrinsically motivated for personal challenge or extrinsically driven by promotion, prestige or income, a strong occupational link exists between this occupational group and graduate study. The strong influence of practical skills contrasts dramatically with the lack of importance of research skills. Students who delayed entrance in order to get practical experience appear to enter graduate school to build on that experience. While worthwhile, it is not completely compatible with the current mission of most

graduate schools and graduate faculty who espouse that research mission. It may be that once enrolled, students are socialized to the importance of research. However, the student's purpose and the institution's purpose appear at odds. Poor student-institutition fit will result in unsuccessful graduate school experience, a loss to the student and the education system. A similiar dilemma between the teaching/research dimension has been much discussed but remains unsolved.

The second variable to have a direct effect on the decision to attend was job specialization. This variable was the only employment characteristic to positively influence the decision. The more highly specialized the practitioner, the more likely the decision to attend graduate school. Challenging work requiring creative solutions for demanding situations spurs the employee to seek answers at the highest level of education. The creative drive instilled by a perceived need to possess knowledge is enhanced at the specialty level. Smart (1987) found early career experience to be important influences on adults re-entering college. He suggests that the intention to return may be stimulated by frustrations associated with salient aspects of employment. Specialization, as used here, may represent a situation in which a decreased level of work satisfaction exists due to awareness of decreased knowlege which thus stimulates the decision to attend school.

The only other variable related to the current job situation to exert a significant effect was income. Similiar to the

findings of Smart (1987), income had a strong negative indirect effect on the decision to attend school. In this occupational group, the higher the income of a working professional, the less likely the potential student will be to return to school. High income has a strong, negative influence on the perceived importance of clinical skills. Diminishing the previous accent on clinical/technical improvement it reduces the likelihood of returning to school. Working professionals with high incomes may simply prefer non-clinical fields, such as business fields, or may have employees who hold the necessary clinical skills.

While previous research by Ethington and Smart (1986) has shown a strong direct and indirect influence of the undergraduate experience on the decision to attend, only one undergraduate characteristic reached significance in this study. The Carnegie rating of the undergraduate institution had the third strongest direct influence (beta = -.180) on the decision to attend. Students attending highly research-oriented institutions were less likely to return to graduate school. College GPA had a positive indirect effect (at the .08 level of significance) on the decision to attend by positively influencing one's attitude toward improving their clinical skills. Of the job related variables and the undergraduate experience variables in this study, the influence of the job-related variables is more important in the decision to attend than the undergraduate experience variables.

The decision to further one's educational committment to the graduate level was further expected to be influenced indirectly by the students background attributes and aspirations. Whether mediated through advantage or disadvantage in institutional choice or advantage or disadvantage in the labor market, the cumulative effects evidenced by these background factors attests to their importance in educational decision-making throughout the life course. Sex exerted both direct and indirect effects. The direct effect of being a women was to decrease the likelihood of positively deciding to attend graduate school but the indirect effect of gender, exerted through lowering women's income, promoted the desire to return to graduate school. Race, that is being white, influenced the graduate school decision through its influence on choosing a undergraduate school with a high Carnegie rating. The students' aspirations unexpectedly had a negative direct effect on the educational advancement of this group. A strong research interest in those with the highest aspiration may lead them to seek less vocationally related or more "pure" fields of study. Indirectly, high aspirations influenced job situation, specialization and income, which in turn influenced the decision to attend graduate school.

The lack of influence of cost factors in this study is of interest. Receipt of financial aid has been shown to have a positive influence on access, choice, and persistence at the undergraduate level (Jensen, 1983) and credited with similar effects at the graduate level (Heiss, 1970; Solmon, 1975). It

has been widely accepted as a method of not only attracting students in general, but the top students specifically. Working professionals in this study appear to be sufficiently delaying entrance until they are financially prepared. As such, cost factors like financial aid, appear to be less important in the decision for professionals than for other groups.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe factors influencing the decision to return to graduate school in one professional group, physical therapy. The longstanding articulation of graduate education and vocational interests was confirmed once again. Of the five variable sets, the overwhelming influence on the decision in this professsional group was exerted by the desire to advance in clinical/technical skills. Job conditions of specialization and income further influenced the educational decision although in different directions. Attitudes toward research and scholarship in the professions do not appear to reach the critical importance assumed in the decision to return to school in the traditional arts and sciences. Little influence from the college experience was found however undergraduates attending institutions with high Carnegie rating were less likely to decide to return to graduate school. Background attributes and aspirations exerted cumulative effects through both institutional choice and labor market opportunities. No influence was seen from cost factors which have been found to be

predominant in the decision of other groups. Relieved of the common cost burdens, professional students may be able to devote time to the intensive study of scholars. Educators planning for graduate education in the professions may benefit from awareness of the unique components of educational decision-making and the manner in which each of the components exerts its influence in the life-long process.

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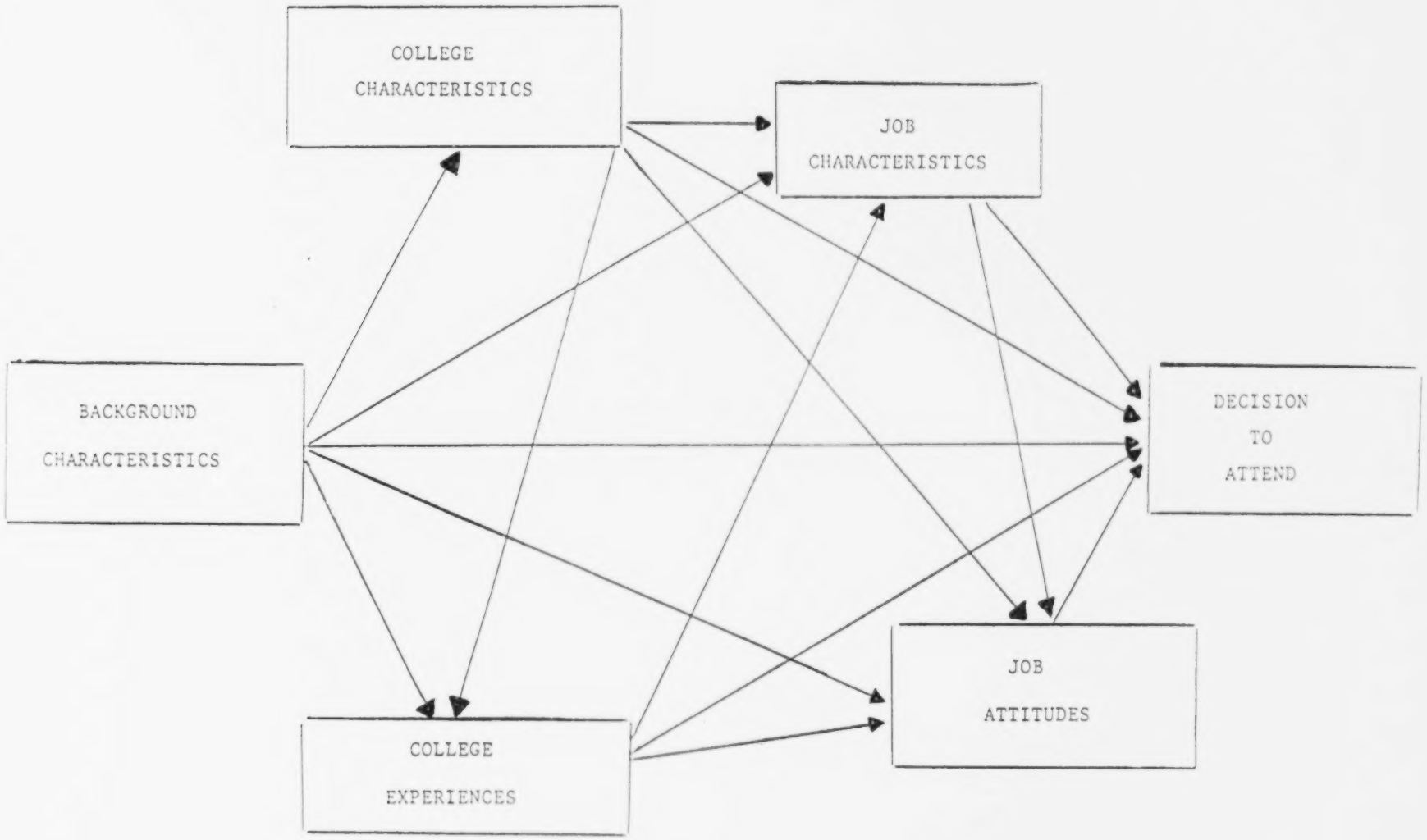

FIGURE 1: CAUSAL MODEL OF DECISION TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL

TABLE 1
VARIABLE DEFINITIONS

Variables	Definition
Background Variables	
1. Sex	A dichotomous measure coded 1="male" and 2="female"
2. Race	A dichotomous measure coded 1= "minority", 2="white",
3. Educational Aspiration	The highest degree planned by the respondent coded: 1="bachelor's degree", 2="master's degree", 3= "other professional degree", 4= "Ph.D. degree"
College Characteristic Variables	
4. College Carnegie Rating	The rating of the respondents undergraduate physical therapy institution coded to reflect research orientation, 1="non-research", 2="research oriented"
5. College Size	Total institutional enrollment of undergraduate institution coded 1= "1,000 or less" to 7="20,000 or more"
College Experience Variables	
6. College Academic Achievement	Average undergraduate grades coded 1= "D" to 7="A"
7. College Satisfaction	Degree of satisfaction with the undergraduate physical therapy institution coded 1="not satisfied" to 4="very satisfied"
Current Job Variables	
8. Current Job Specialization	Level of current job specialization coded 1="generalist", 2="specialist"
9. Current Job Satisfaction	Degree of satisfaction with current job coded 1="not satisfied" to 4= "very satisfied"
10. Income	Income from current position coded 1= "less than $20,000" to 7="more than $45,000"

TABLE 1, cont.
VARIABLE DEFINITIONS

Variables	Definition
Attitude Factor Variables	
11. Importance of Cost	Sum of respondent's combined level of importance of general cost, financial aid, and assistantship availability. Each coded 1="not important" to 5= "most important"; alpha reliability = .763
12. Importance of Research Skill	Sum of respondents combined level of importance of research skills, obtaining a Ph.D. and having an academic career. Each coded 1="not important" to 5="most important"; alpha reliability = .694
12. Importance of Clinical Expertise	Rating of level of importance of improving clinical skills while in graduate school coded 1="not important" to 5="most important"
Decision Variable	
14. Decision to Attend Graduate School in Physical Therapy	Decision to attend graduate school in Physical Therapy within 5 years, coded 1="yes" and 0="no"

TABLE II

STRUCTURAL EQUATIONS FOR MODEL OF GRADUATE SCHOOL DECISION

VARIABLE	COLRATNG	COLSIZE	COLGPA	COLSAT	JOBSPEC	JOBSAT	CURINC	COST	RESRCH	CLINIC	DECISION
1. Sex	.017	.018	-.020	.138*	-.020	-.001	-.204*	.063	-.033	-.020	-.116*
	(.020)	(.099)	(-.050)	(.283)	(-.025)	(-.001)	(-.735)	(.294)	(-.020)	(-.081)	(-.138)
2. Race	.261*	.366*	.014	-.048	.112	.020	-.041	-.046	-.014	.093	-.071
	(.414)	(2.624)	(.047)	(-.0130	(.187)	(.050)	(-.193)	(-.278)	(-.107)	(.494)	(-.111)
3. Highest Degree Expected	-.015	-.106	.125	.187*	.158*	-.023	.191*	-.083	.499*	-.100	-.197*
	(-.008)	(-.272)	(.147)	(.180)	(.094)	(-.020)	(.322)	(-.181)	(1.412)	(-.189)	(-.110)
4. College Carnegie Rating			.122	.077	-.021	.009	-.148	.099	.116	.030	-.180*
			(.252)	(.130)	(-.022)	(.014)	(-.440)	(.378)	(.578)	(.099)	(-.177)
5. College Size			.001	-.029	-.017	.029	-.024	-.148	-.002	-.065	.006
			(.000)	(-.011)	(-.004)	(.010	(-.016)	(-.125)	(-.002)	(-.048)	(.001)
6. College Academic Achievement					-.080	-.009	-.014	-.006	.165*	.113	.024
					(-.041)	(-.007)	(-.021)	(-.012)	(.396)	(.183)	(.011)
7. College Satisfaction					.079	.063	.027	.016	-.032	-.035	.010
					(.049)	(.057)	(.047)	(.035)	(-.094)	(-.069)	(.006)
8. Current Job Specialization								-.004	.111	-.042	.116*
								(-.016)	(.523)	(-.131)	(.108)
9. Current Job Satisfaction								-.110	.054	.074	.038
								(-.275)	(.174)	(.162)	(.024)
10. Current Income								.061	-.097	-.183*	-.091
								(.078)	(-.163)	(-.206)	(-.030)
11. Importance of Cost											-.020
											(-.005)
12. Importance of Research Skills											.111
											(.022)
13. Importance of Clinical Skills											.528*
											(.156)
14. Decision to Attend Graduate School											
R^2	.070	.156	.030	.052	.046	.006	.135	.036	.326	.078	.396

a Metric coefficients are given in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

TABLE III
DIRECT, INDIRECT, AND TOTAL EFFECTS IN
MODEL TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL

VARIABLE	DIRECT	INDIRECT	TOTAL
1. Sex	-.116*	.018	-.098
	(-.138)	(.022)	(-.117)
2. Race	-.071	.035	-.036
	(-.111)	(.055)	(-.056)
3. Highest Degree Expected	-.197*	-.004	-.201
	(-.110)	(-.002)	(-.112)
4. College Carnegie Rating	-.180*	.066	-.114
	(-.177)	(.065)	(-.113)
5. College Size	.006	-.026	-.020
	(.001)	(-.006)	(-.004)
6. College Academic Achievement	.024	.072	.096
	(.011)	(.034)	(.045)
7. College Satisfaction	.010	-.014	-.004
	(.006)	(-.008)	(-.003)
8. Current Job Specialization	.116*	-.010	.106
	(.108)	(-.009)	(.099)
9. Current Job Satisfaction	.038	.047	.085
	(.024)	(.030)	(.055)
10. Current Income	-.091	-.109*	-.199
	(-.030)	(-.036)	(-.066)
11. Importance of Cost	-.020		-.020
	(-.005)		(-.005)
12. Importance of Research Skills	.111		.111
	(.022)		(.022)
13. Importance of Clinical Skills	.528*		.528
	(.156)		(.156)
14. Decision to Attend Graduate School			

a Metric coefficients are given in parentheses.
* $p < .05$